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ABSTRACT

Loneliness has been implicated as a central causal factor in depression, suicide, social problems, physical illness and general maladjustment. To investigate the correlates of loneliness in gifted adolescents, 175 adolescents (aged 14-17) who had been separated from their homes to participate in a special academic program completed a battery of inventories measuring loneliness (Young Loneliness Inventory), anger (Novoco Anger Inventory), depresson (short form of the Multiscore Depression Inventory) and the effects of life events and adaptation (Coddington adolescent adaptation of the Holmes and Rahe SRE measure of life events). All instruments were administered on the first day of the formal group session. An analysis of the results showed that loneliness was predicted best by depression, life events, and anger. Components of depression which best predicted loneliness were helplessness, social introversion, and low self esteem. Although the results must be considered cautiously, they do suggest that the lonely but gifted adolescent, in addition to being depressed and angry, is adapting to life event changes. (Author/BL)

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The Lonely and Gifted Adolescent: Stress, Depression and Anger

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Abstract

Correlates of loneliness were examined in 175 gifted adolescents (ages 14-17) separated from their home environment to participate in a special academic program. Subjects completed the Young Loneliness Inventory, the Novaco Anger Inventory, the short form of the Multiscore Depression Inventory, the Dimensions of Anger Reactions and the Coddington adolescent adaptation of the Holmes and Rahe SRE measure of life events. Regression analyses indicated that loneliness was predicted best by depression, life events, and anger. Components of depression which best predicted loneliness were helplessness, social introversion and low self-esteem. Although the results, particularly the regression weights must be considered cautiously until they are crossvalidated, they suggest that the lonely but gifted adolescent, in addition to being depressed and angry, was adapting to life event changes.

The Lonely and Gifted Adolescent: Stress, Depression, and Anger

Loneliness is a common and distressing problem for many people (Bradburn, 1969). It has been implicated as a central causal factor in depression (Ortega, 1969), suicide (Wenz, 1977), and a variety of individual and social problems including alcoholism (Nerviado & Gross, 1976), delinquent behavior (Ostrov & Offer, 1978), physical illness, overutilization of health care services (Lynch, 1976), and general maladjustment (Goswick & Jones, 1981; Ostrov & Offer, 1978).

Popular conceptualizations treat loneliness as an unpleasant psychological state resulting from dissatisfaction with the number and quality of one's social and emotional relationships (Peplau & Perlman, 1979; Young, 1981). It is said to be accompanied by anger, self-disappointment, unhappiness and pessimism (Young, 1979). Young (1981) describes lonely individuals as being without caring person(s) to depend on, to love and to understand, to trust and to share meaningful values and interests. They experience alienation - feeling different from others; exclusion - not belonging to a desired group; feeling unloved - unattractive and unaccepted; and constriction - harboring thoughts and feelings they cannot express to others.

Only relatively recently has attention been directed toward empirical specification of correlates, predictors, and consequences of loneliness. This research has been spearheaded by development of self-assessment devices with promising construct and concurrent validity, notably the revised UCLA Loneliness Scale and the Young Loneliness Inventory.

An examination of studies based primarily on college students reveals that subjective loneliness is correlated with self-reported depression (Bragg, 1979;

Russell, Peplau & Cutrona, 1980; Young, 1979; Berndt, 1981) and with inventories tapping characteristics frequently associated with self-reported depression, including dissatisfaction with self and low self-esteem (Goswick & Jones, 1981); social and general anxiety (Jones, Freemon & Goswick, 1981); introversion, low assertiveness, feelings of alientation, external locus of control (Hojat, 1982); reduced social and nonsocial activity, perceived unfairness of the world (Jones et al., 1981); hyperalertness or spectator behavior (Weiss, 1973); shyness (Cheek & Busch, 1981; Maroldo, 1981), boredom and restlessness (Russell et al., 1980); and reduced self-disclosure (Solano, Batten, & Parish, 1982).

Our research explored the contribution of stressful life events and anger (as assessed by expectancies and appraisals of provocative situations), variables previously not systematically studied in relation to loneliness. Stressful life events have been related to a host of adverse physical and psychological conditions including depression and maladjustment in adolescents and adults (Hudgens, 1974; Paykel, 1979), and anger has been considered to be similarly implicated in depression (Novaco, 1977).

Loneliness is not limited, however, to college sophomores. Adolescence is notably associated with marked psychological and physiological changes that may accentuate loneliness. As aptly put by Ostrov and Offer, the process of separation and individuation has loneliness as its cutting edge. Certainly the gifted adolescent should be at this edge. However, loneliness has not been systematically investigated in this population. In a recent study by Berndt, Kaiser and van Aalst (1982) it was noted that, relative to other adolescents, a gifted sample was more introverted, as measured by the Multiscore Depression Inventory. Because these individuals were separated from their home environment and its social supports and treated differently from their peers by selection into a special academic program, we suggested that loneliness was a determinant of this

finding and was therefore worthy of more systematic investigation with specification of components of depression that might be predictive or associated with loneliness.

Method

We administered the Young Loneliness Inventory, the Novaco Anger Inventory, the Dimensions of Anger Reactions, the short form of the Multiscore Depression Inventory, and the Coddington adolescent adaptation of the Holmes and Rahe SRE measure of life events to a sample of 175 junior and senior high school students ranging in age from 14-17 years who attended the Governor's School of South Carolina, a select summer academic program held at the College of Charleston. Participants, chosen in proportion to enrollment from public and private schools statewide, ranked at or above the top 5% of their class, or scored equivalently on standardized ability or achievement tests. They were identified by their school selection panel as the most intellectually and creatively gifted. All instruments were administered on the first day of the formal group session. Test instructions emphasized confidentiality of results which would be used for research purposes only.

Results

Two stepwise (forward) regression analyses were used to determine predictors of loneliness in the gifted. The first used all measures (subanalyses for males and females were also run), and a second analysis included only the number of life events and the nine subscales of the Multiscore Depression Inventory as predictors. Utilizing all the variables a significant regression function predicting loneliness was derived with significant loadings for the Multiscore Depression Inventory, number of life event changes on the Coddington, and the Novaco Anger Inventory, $\underline{F}$ (3,171) = 64.66, $p < .001$. Subanalyses for males

and females were similar.

Insert Table 1 about here

Another analysis, utilizing the subscales of the Multiscore Depression Inventory along with the Coddington stress score indicated that loneliness could be significantly predicted by adaptation to stressful life changes, helplessness, social introversion and low self-esteem, F (4,170) = 37.91, $p < .001$.

Insert Table 2 about here

An examination of the means and standard deviations of the entire sample reveals scores close to the means of the normal standardization groups (see Table 3).

Insert Table 3 about here

Discussion

That loneliness was predictable by the MDI supports previous research indicating a substantial relationship between self-reported depression and loneliness. The MDI, designed for use with normal populations, was particularly appropriate for this investigation. Prominence of the subscales of helplessness, social introversion and low self-esteem in describing the lonely, gifted adolescent supports research implicating similar constructs in scattered accounts of the lonely college student (Beck & Young, 1978; Goswick & Jones, 1981; Hojat, 1982).

Helplessness suggests that adolescent loneliness is described and predicted by frustrated dependency, attention, and recognition needs; exclusion,

and cognitions of insufficient love, understanding and support. The relevance of social introversion replicates our earlier research. Moreover, social introversion suggests a style reflecting ambivalence and constriction in relationships which is entirely compatible with a strong need for achievement. Low self-esteem suggests perceived or actual alienation from the not-so-gifted peers, and inadequacy in the face of social and high intellectual demands (some of which may be unrealistic) that are set by the self and important others. Somewhat surprising to us was the finding (see Table 3) that these gifted adolescents didn't show greater loneliness than college-age peers. The results, therefore, describe the lonely but gifted adolescent and shouldn't be generalized to other populations. Furthermore, developmental and prospective studies are needed to obtain clearer evidence concerning the causal relationship between aspects of depression and facets of loneliness.

The relationship between stressful events and loneliness supports theories emphasizing the importance of disruption of relationships and loss of supports precipitating loneliness as well as limiting opportunities for development and enhancement of social skills required for affiliation and intimate, mutually supportive, relationships (Beck & Young, 1978; Lynch, 1976; Weiss, 1973). Furthermore, depressogenic cognitions may sequentially follow and potentiate effects of stressful events on loneliness by providing negative, pessimistic, unrealistic meaning to them; limiting cognitions of self-efficacy, and restricing interpersonal trust and self-disclosure (Hammen & Cochran, 1981; Wortman & Dintzer, 1978).

Future research requires identification of clusters of life stresses and their relative importance that may be predominantly associated with proposed dimensions of loneliness and its chronic or situational nature (Young, 1979; 1981).

The hypothesized relationship between predilection to anger and loneliness was noteworthy. Although anger may seem easily seen as a reaction to feeling rejected, alienated, excluded and socially deprived, one may also see it as a manifestation of the type A behavior pattern which appears to be elevated in the gifted American adolescent (Kaiser & Bryant, 1982). This behavior pattern, strongly reinforced in our society, permits compensation for perceived inadequacies in other modes of functioning and which, perhaps, may facilitate and exacerbate loneliness. Research is needed to test this hypothesis.

It is evident that stressful life events and loneliness need not preclude superior academic and creative performance in the adolescent, although they may have detrimental consequences for achievement in other settings (Ponzetti & Cate, 1981). Our initial results should be viewed with appropriate caution. Relationships demonstrated here should not be seen as a unidirectional causal ordering; in fact, they are likely to be complex and reciprocal.

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Table 1

Predictors of Loneliness in Gifted Adolescents

Instrument	Standardized Regression Weights	Standard Error
Multiscore Depression Inventory	.482	.044
Coddington	.290	.068
Novaco Anger Inventory	.166	.006

Table 2

Life Events and Depressive Symptoms which Predict Loneliness in Gifted Adolescents

Instruments	Standardized Regression Weights	Standard Error
Coddington	.501	.058
Helplessness	.274	.455
Social Introversion	.196	.271
Self-Esteem	.134	.263

Note. $n = 175$

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations on Measures of Depression, Anger, and Stress

Measure	Mean	SD
Multiscore Depression Inventory (short form)	11.61	9.98
Social Introversion subscale	1.48	1.55
Guilt subscale	2.13	1.95
Cognitive Difficulty subscale	1.82	1.65
Pessimism subscale	.66	1.16
Irritability subscale	1.10	1.39
Energy Level subscale	1.78	2.12
Sad Mood subscale	.62	1.05
Self-Esteem subscale	.91	1.48
Instrumental Helplessness subscale	.41	.82
Novaco Anger Inventory	250.34	59.72
Young Loneliness Scale	9.41	6.43
Dimensions of Anger Reactions	16.95	10.31
Number of Stressful Life Events	6.89	6.24
Coddington Stress Score	252.60	136.85

Note. $n = 175$